

Los Gatos couple won't leave home without their olive oil

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Whenever they go out to eat, Frank and Marti Menacho take along a bottle of their own olive oil.

And it is, literally, their own olive oil. The Menachos are owners of Olivas de Oro olive company, and they prefer to use their organic, estate grown, extra virgin blend when they dine. Of course, before they crack open the bottle, they politely ask their server if it's OK.

Currently harvesting their third crop of olives, the Menachos fell into the olive oil business almost by accident. While looking to buy a vineyard, a friend showed the Los Gatos couple his olive orchard in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Situated on 160 acres of rolling hills near Oroville, the 80-year-old orchard "looked like a picture of Tuscany," Marti said. Inspired by the orchard's sheer beauty, the Menachos determined the orchard had the potential to meet their business objectives even better than a vineyard.

With 11,000 olive trees, the orchard's size meant the Menachos could harvest, press and bottle a 100 percent estate-grown, extra virgin olive oil.

"We could be totally self-sufficient with our own olives and didn't anticipate having to supplement by buying someone else's olives. We wanted to do an estate blend," Marti said.

Being able to blend different olive varieties was also essential to their vision. Although the Menachos were new to orchard tending, Frank had been buying single varietal olive pressings for five years and blending his own olive oil for use in their home kitchen.

"I always blend for a more full-bodied, complex taste," Frank said.

A former wholesale fish broker, Frank learned the nuances of olive oil blending from the chefs to whom he made regular deliveries. As chance would have it, all five of the Spanish olive varieties he had been blending were planted on the orchard.

In their first year, the Menachos bottled 3,000 gallons of olive oil and took home a silver medal in the 2001 Oils of America competition. In 2002, they bottled 11,000 gallons, entered the Olive Oil of the World competition and took home three bronze medals, including a packaging award for their distinctive, 500 ml cobalt blue bottle.

In December, Frank Menacho gathered a small team of harvesters to help him hand-pick more than 100 tons of ripening Ascolano, Sevillano, Mission, Manzanillo and Barouni olives. The Menachos harvest the olives early, "when they are at the height of their aroma and their lowest acidity," he said.

Within 24 hours of harvesting, the Menachos transport the olives to a leased facility in Hollister, where they cold press the olives between traditional, 2-ton granite wheels. They press each varietal separately and pump the oil into individual drums, from which they can extract samples to create their olive oil blend.

When the blending is complete, the Menachos pump the oil into a stainless steel tank, top it off with nitrogen and let it rest for several weeks. This resting period allows the sediment to settle before bottling.

To describe their extra virgin olive oil, the Menachos rely on sensory details such as "full bodied and complex," "clean tasting," and "fruity with a hint of fresh-cut grass and a long, peppery finish."

These descriptors, which indicate fruity, bitter and pungent positive attributes, are exactly what the California Olive Oil Council looks for when it certifies extra virgin olive oils. Established in 1992, the council grants its seal of quality only to 100 percent extra virgin olive oil without defects.

"Certification was very important to us because the labeling laws in the U. S. only require that the olives are cold pressed to be labeled extra virgin," Marti said.

To become California Olive Oil Council certified, Olivas de Oro oil went through a chemical analysis by an independent lab and a sensory evaluation by an internationally recognized tasting panel.

The lab found the oil to contain only 0.15 percent free fatty acid, which is significantly lower than the requirement of 1 percent. And the UC Davis tasting panel noted the presence of all three positive attributes of olive oil -- fruity, bitter and pungent. Only one positive attribute is necessary for certification.

But words alone are no substitute for tasting the olive oil, so the Menachos always encourage consumers at farmers' markets to enjoy a sample. Often, customers will dip a piece of bread in the olive oil, start to chew and walk away 50 feet. "Then they return and ask, 'Whoa! What was that?' " Frank Menacho said.

The oil's long, peppery finish, which is attributed to early-harvested Manzanillo and Sevillano olives, is usually what surprises tasters.

Other tasters inquire about the olive's golden color. "There's a perception that color has something to do with flavor. The perception is that green is more flavorful," Marti Menacho said.

But color really has nothing to do with flavor, she said. Instead, the Spanish varieties that they grow dictate the golden color of the oil and provided inspiration for the company's name, which translates to "olives of gold."

Boulder Creek cookbook author Troy Brown first tasted Olivas de Oro extra virgin olive oil when he traded Frank Menacho's father a cookbook for a bottle of oil.

"I went home and tried it and used it in a lot of recipes. It's a really good olive oil with a nice, smooth, clean taste. By being organic, that's a plus," Brown said.

Now, Brown travels with the oil around the country doing cooking demonstrations to promote his book, "Troy Brown's Portabella Cookbook" (Fabrizio Publications, \$22).

"When I go on the road, I tell people it's the olive oil I use," Brown said.

In September, the Menachos got an endorsement from popular TV chef Emeril Legasse, who appeared on CNN using their signature oil at Fetzer Vineyard's Fun in the Harvest Sun event. Now, the Menachos are working with chefs at Emeril's restaurants to carry the oil.

Frank Menacho, who handles all of the operations and is responsible for sales, says that restaurants use their oil to finish porterhouse steaks, braised rabbit and petrale sole.

As a small, custom producer, the Menachos have focused most of their sales efforts on the Bay Area. Their signature olive oil bottles are available in local stores, including Andronico's, Draeger's, Cosentino's and Oakville Grocery. (For a complete list, visit <http://www.olivasdeoro.com/>.)

To increase sales, the Menachos placed an ad in the December issue of Fine Cooking and have produced a TV ad in conjunction with Buyers Shopping Network. They have also set up a Yahoo store so customers can purchase oil directly from their Web site.

Expressing his concern about selling out, Frank Menacho asked, "What if we don't press enough?"

"Then we're done for the year," Marti Menacho replied.

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